

Making Case for Tolerance, Peace and Development in Nigeria from the Lessons of Matthew 5: 38-42

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Abstract

This work begins on the premise that Nigeria in the last decade has been characterized by crisis of ethnic and religious dimensions. The nature of the Nigerian state seems to be not only responsible for the regrettably deepening ethno-religious crisis that have become endemic and unfortunate, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to evolve credible and competent strategies that could address this ugly trend. It is on this note that the paper discussed the message of non-retaliation and tolerance in Matthew 5: 38-42 as a panacea for peace and development in Nigeria. The paper adopts descriptive and analytical method. It argued that a new type of thinking away from conflicts is essential if mankind is to survive. Jesus in the passage studied did not mention the abolition of war or conflicts, but he is prohibiting the members of the kingdom of God the attitude of revenge. The *lex talions* or the law of retaliation is an attempt to enact fair justice among the people. To revenge as shown in the work can consume one's emotion, cause all kinds of emotional problems. A person can be so much engrossed in revenge that he becomes self-centered, destructive and paranoid. It was noted that even though conflicts are inevitable, the violence and pains inflicted is usually greater than the ultimate gain. The paper recommended that individual and Nigeria as a whole should develop a commitment to non violence from the teaching of Jesus. Among other recommendations, Nigerians should not be consumed with fighting over property and disputing rights. Tolerance and acceptability should be the watchword of everybody; it is then that our society can be a better place. Peace must be preached and equally embodied. We must create a new reconciled society in which no walls or barriers are tolerated, and in which the divisive influences of race, nationality, rank and sex have been destroyed.

Keywords: Non-Retaliation, Tolerance, Acceptance, Peace, Development.

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INTRODUCTION

Man is never bereft of knowledge. He is never lacking in terms of development and advancement. This applies in many facets of life, be it religious, socio-economic and political development. With sentiment of faith apart, one of the greatest men that ever lived is Jesus the Christ, if not the greatest at least as his followers believed. As legacies, he left his words (and deeds) behind. These words are golden, and his followers acclaimed they are sharper than two edge sword and they are words of eternal life. But as ages go by man in his ever-growing wisdom and advancement in knowledge continues, in commensurate degree, to jettison those great words with less attention to them and their valued meanings.

Those words which once built a small group of believers into a vivacious community, a bunch of timid men and women to great, fearless and undaunted preachers that influence the entire world and human

history, today is no longer seen or regarded as having values but less influence or impact on humanity and its history. Ironically, the same word is in the world today, most proclaimed but less claimed. It is most aired but least heard. Ironically again, the consequence of this has left the world bereft of humanity. Rather than acceptability, man has tolerance. Rather than genuine peace, man now has relative peace. He though is advancing, but he is not developing. Man continues to progress and advance toward an unbalance or a never balanced equation, all because he presumed to have advanced beyond the spirit of the Master's word and legacies. A paradigmatic case is made of the master's word (as recorded in Matthew 5: 38-42), how in his wisdom man in the present age has counted as foolish those words but consequently is paying heavy prices for what he considered as wisdom. This paper therefore, propose a return and revisit to the wisdom of the gospel of Jesus Christ which this generation has tagged foolish and re-think and re-channel his path to genuine peace and

development as he said, "I am the way the truth and the life."

The Text Matthew 5:38-42 reads

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth.'

But I tell you, do not respond in kind to an evil person. If someone strike you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Review of Scholarly Interpretations of the Passage

The history of interpretation of this passage, according to M. Simonetti, is extensive, and the interpretations themselves vary wildly. Two schools of thought dominate the history of interpretation: the *rigorist* and *mitigating* viewpoints. The rigorist takes the text literally, or at least as literally as they deem necessary, and therefore the extent of rigor varies quite significantly. Mitigating interpreters try to get behind the text so they can figure out exactly what Jesus is referring to. To this author, neither method is inherently faulty. In fact, one might expect a convergence of sorts somewhere in between both extremes with the application of sound reason [1]. But as Luz says, "a simple back-to-Jesus is impossible for basic theological reasons, it becomes necessary on the basis of the exemplary nature of the text to take one's own situation into account" [2]. The truth of this statement is obvious given this passage's history.

In the view of Origen, Jesus only tells mankind how to deal with insults and persecutions. He says those words make good sense considering how sensitive their situation would have been if serious physical resistance had taken place. He also emphasized that by doing well to enemies they would "heap burning coals" upon them (Proverbs 25: 22) and not give them any reasons to persecute them save for proclaiming the name of Jesus Christ. Martin Luther also, in a series of sermons, was said to have presented his well-known *Doctrine of the Two Realms* [3], the secular and the spiritual, whereby the Christian lives in both and must act appropriately and in accordance with both. In the spiritual realm, in other words the *church*, the Christian must obey all the commands of the Sermon on the Mount. However, in the secular realm, the natural law or 'common sense' must prevail. One wonders whether this really hits the mark, though, since even though a dividing line is drawn, certain individuals still receive special moral privilege to exact force against others. It is as though they understand that the passage has limited, but specific application but cannot determine how far it extends. Ulrich Luz is an interesting example of one who sees the issues but does

not quite understand how to resolve them. He has pointed out the inconsistencies within church history and has recognized the need for further study and interpretation, but gives little indication of a solution [4]. John MacArthur an enigmatic and popular contemporary theologian, does not do much to advance a radical view of these verses, and rather falls back on a more traditional reformed viewpoint. He rejects the notion that morality is universal and uses Romans 13 to excuse governmental agents from responsibility. While some find this convincing, one cannot help but wonder why God would create a world with such moral relativism embedded within the very fabric of human interaction. If there is a difference between a private citizen and an office-holder, it is unbecoming known to Jesus, thus we should not be swayed in our dedication to renouncing coercion [5].

On the other hand, N. T Wright's interpretation which says that Matthew 5:38-42 advocates a form of passive resistance to all coercion seems much more reasonable and consistent with the overall message of Jesus. He concludes his comments with a sound warning: "The people of light are never more at risk than when they are lured into fighting the darkness with more darkness" [6].

Synthesis of the passage

The crux of Jesus' message in Matthew 5:38-42 is that the Christian's responsibility is to renounce the use of force as his means of achieving his goals. Whether the advancement of the gospel or the procuring of physical wealth; coercion is not proper for the people of God. This must involve renouncing the institutionalization of force in society as well. No man deserves special moral privilege due to position. Renunciation of force is a contrasting sign of the kingdom of God and is an expression of love of neighbor. The juxtaposition of forbidding coercion and commanding sincere love serves to remind us that all of this originates in the radical nature of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, we are given a model for how to respond when certain forms of coercion are brought against us. Jesus is proposing a strategy for robbing the cruel, the violent, and the oppressive of their power. In summary:

- *If you are willing to treat me as subhuman, I will not respond in kind. But I will actively maintain that we are not two unequal people.*
- *If you are willing to sue me unjustly, I will not respond in kind. Are you willing to perpetuate the injustice and deprive me of my well-being?*
- *If you are willing to use force to make me do what you want and to demean me, then I will heap coals upon your head by willingly going the extra mile.*

These are all possible because *Jesus did it*; his victory on the cross shows us this new way to be human. "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not

retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1Peter 2: 23). In essence, Jesus is advocating that everyone make a personal commitment to non-violence. This is certainly a radical command, especially considering that most rational humans agree that self-defense is a basic right of human beings. Whether this is a prohibition against *all* self-defense or not remains to be seen. Furthermore, Jesus connects benevolence with non-retaliation as well, and perhaps this provides a clue to the meaning of being a non-violent person [7]. Even though verse 38 is rather self-explanatory, Jesus quotes a familiar Old Testament passage regarding the rule of retaliation for inflicted harm. The important point is not that it resists offended parties from enacting unlimited revenge, to forbid the so-called “maximalist” position on punishment from being the rule. It also serves the function of preventing further crime.

Verse 39 contains the antithesis, “But I tell you...”, and gives the radicalized principle contrasting verse 38: “Do not *resist* an evil person” (NIV), or in this author’s paraphrase: “Do not *respond in kind* to an evil person.” The trouble in interpreting this verse, at least for the NIV, is the *type* and *extent* of resistance that is forbidden. Certainly Jesus is not saying to never do anything about evil. Even he, when he found his Father’s house being taken over by merchants, bound a whip of cords together and drove them out (Matt. 21: 12; John 2 : 15). The disciples on numerous occasions chose to obey God rather than evil men (Acts 4: 19). On two occasions we are told to resist the devil specifically (James 4:7; 1Peter 5:9). However, as the following exegesis demonstrates, the antithesis should be understood as a renouncing of the use of force against others, as renouncing the seeking of vengeance and trading evil for evil. Hence, the paraphrase “respond in kind” is used in place of “resist.” 1 Peter 3: 91 explains vividly why we act this way as well: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Verse 39b is the classic “turn the other cheek” saying of Jesus. The “slap” mentioned here was primarily an expression of hate and insult, rather than a physical assault with the intent of depriving an individual of life or health. The pain caused is important, but secondary to the insult. The addition of *right cheek* could mean an especially rude insult since that would require a backhanded or left-handed slap. What Jesus is saying that one should not let violence keep escalating? Hitting back, as N.T. Wright says, “Keeps the evil in circulation [8]”. Rather, turn the insult around without insulting back, volunteer the left cheek and let him approach you on equal ground. Offering the other cheek implies that the aggressor can hit again if he likes, but he will do so as an equal and not a superior. In verse 40, there is the situation of the debtor’s suit. The tunic was often used as a pledge by the poor against a lawsuit. To give the cloak

as well indicates a significant increase because the cloak was much more valuable. This could be an indirect opposition to the Old Testament law of pledging, because if a poor man gave a cloak as a pledge it had to be given back by the evening so he could sleep in it (Exodus 22: 26f; Deut 24: 12f). What is happening here, though, is that the poor person is basically being taken advantage of in the lawsuit by someone more powerful. Jesus is saying that you may not win the lawsuit, but you can display the aggressor’s actions for what they are. Since most people only wore these two garments, by giving him the cloak as well you shame him with your impoverished nakedness. This was, in fact, what the rich and powerful were doing at the time, shaming those who had little, aggressing against their Hebrew brothers, and taking what did not belong to them [9].

The Romans frequently tyrannized Israel, and verse 41 illustrates the commonplace injustice of soldiers forcing civilians to carry their loads for significant distances. Although, this was sometimes demanded by private citizens as well, this is probably a point against the Roman occupation. N.T Wright explains this verse thoroughly:

Roman soldiers had the right to force civilians to carry their equipment for one mile. But the law was quite strict; it forbade them to make someone go more than that. Turn the tables on them, advises Jesus. Don’t fret and fume and plot revenge. Copy your generous God! Go a second mile, and astonish the soldier (and perhaps alarm him – what if his commanding officer found out?) with the news that there is a different way to be human, a way which doesn’t plot revenge, which doesn’t join the armed resistance movement, but which wins God’s kind of victory over violence and injustice [10].

Wright makes an excellent point, and it actually resonates throughout verses 39b-41, that Jesus is showing his followers a new way to be human that rejects the conventional use of force as the rule. Rather, through a form of “passive resistance,” violent actions are displayed for what they are without escalating the violence. This is God’s kind of victory. Verse 42 addresses benevolence, and one must immediately ask *why* Jesus included this particular saying within this exposition. It seems almost like a framing statement, not quite addressing the same thing as before but wrapping it up all in one neat package. The command is more general, a comment about the attitude of the Christian more than a charge to bankrupt oneself at the earliest opportunity. Wright’s exhortation of “Copy your generous God!” keeps coming to mind as the response of the Christian to Jesus’ words. God has shown benevolent, compassionate mercy on all people, and his people can do the same [11]. Therefore, taking verses 39b-42 altogether, one can ask generally what did Jesus intend with these demands? Are these commandments

meant to be taken literally or do they primarily aim at a direction of acting or attitude? To some extent, one must remember that the encouragement simply to endure wrongdoing is present in many philosophical writings of that era, including those outside Judaism of Jesus' day. Meanwhile it could be said that, within verses 38-42 is a symbolic protest against the regular rule of force in the world. The gentle protest demands an active behavior, setting forth a provocative contrast between the way things *are* and the way things *ought to be*. Renouncing the use of force is an expression of love of neighbor. But this is not love of neighbor in the narrow sense of purely between two people; rather it proclaims a broad, riveting statement against the coercive mechanisms that rule the world. God's way involves breaking through these mechanisms of behavior, and delivers true freedom [12].

The Need for Tolerance Peace and Development in Nigeria

Over the year, we have noted with concern that Nigeria has not been a peaceful nation because of the high rate of insecurity, conflicts and inter tribal or ethnic wars. Though Nigeria abounds with human and natural resources, the country has since independence witnessed a number of inter and intra ethnic and religious conflicts which continue to be an impediment to its overall development. As rightly observed by Eleazu, "the people of Nigeria are many and varied [13]." Nigeria population is estimated to be over 120 million and about 391 different ethnic groups [14] with divergent socio-political, economic, cultural and religious backgrounds. With this heterogametic nature, Nigeria is no doubts a place where social conflicts and especially of ethnic nature and intolerance are bound to occur. Meanwhile, it should be noted that conflict can be found everywhere. In fact, some scholars have even suggested that war is essentially an inevitable and even desirable state of being. This suggests that war is part of human nature, it is not intrinsically evil. This is because there could be legitimate wars especially when a just cause is being pursued and at times could be the process through which the truly civilized nations express their strength and vitality.

However, in Nigeria case, most conflict happened as a result of ethnicity or religious differences. The causes of conflicts between and within ethnic and religious groups could be seen in a number of factors, such as ways of propagating the religions, mistrust and suspicion between the followers of the various religious and ethnic groups, selfishness ignorance and intolerance among the groups. Although Nigeria is a secular state, yet some top or influential government officials take biased decisions in favour of their religions, especially on employment and other government affairs. This action always provokes the followers of other religions which consequently result into crisis in the name of religion. An example is that of complains by Christians about the Arabic inscriptions in the Nigerian currency,

while on the other hand the Muslims too complain about Friday not being work-free day just like their Christian counterparts enjoy Sundays as work free day. But unfortunately, many of the government's policies and programs designed to consolidate the diverse ethnic and religious groups have often been poorly conceived, and are counter-productive, ineffective or misunderstood [15].

Nigeria was seen and regarded as the home of only three tribes; Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba. Many minority ethnic groups began to feature in the sharp competitions in the entire aspects of government. This suspicion and fear by the minority tribes over the major tribes remains a prominent feature in the Nigerian socio-political and economic activities and have in no small measure helped in intensifying violence in the country. By far the most worrisome of these crises is the recent large number of unimaginable bomb attacks by the Boko Haram movement which continue on a daily basis. The group's modus operandi is related with the Maitatsine sectarian group in terms of philosophy and objectives coupled with its organizational planning and armed resistance. Despite the Bill passed on anti-terrorism by the Nigerian National Assembly on February 17, 2011, as well as the negotiation efforts made by President Jonathan, cease-fire has proved abortive and Boko Haram activities are spreading to other parts of the country [16]. With this impression on the minds of the Nigerian peoples, it becomes very difficult for them to work harmoniously together without such tribal conflicts. Each of the tribes of the country today works only for the interest of its people and not the nation, thus in these blind competitions of each trying to dominate the other, conflicts of ethnic nature always occur. It should therefore be noted that it is the very survival of the human race and of our planet which is at stake. All these are not without negative effects and this will be discussed below.

Consequences of Recurrence of Conflicts

According to the given estimate, at least 108 million people were killed in wars in the twentieth century. Estimates for the total number killed in wars throughout all of human history range from 150 million to 1 billion. War has several other effects on population, including decreasing the birthrate by taking men away from their wives. Considering the cost of conflicts too, one would see how good it is to live peaceably with one neighbor. As for the civilian experience in conflicts, they are shot, bombed, raped, starved, and driven from their homes. Also the cost of becoming a refugee is equally terrible. This is because refugees have very high mortality rates, due primarily to malnutrition and infectious disease [17]. Children and women too are not left out of the consequences of conflicts. More than 2 million children were noted to have been killed in wars during the 1990s. Three times that number were disabled or seriously injured. Twenty million children were

displaced from their homes. Many were forced into prostitution. A large percentage of those will contract AIDS. Children born to mothers who are raped or forced into prostitution often become outcasts. Women on the other hand often take on larger economic roles in wartime. They must find ways to compensate for their husband's military deployment or unemployment. Those in war zones must search for food, water, medicine, and fuel despite shortages. Some women in war zones are forced into prostitution to provide for their family. Famine and stress cause increased stillbirth and early infant death. AIDS risk increases for many women in war, from prostitution and husbands who return from military duty with HIV, or rape [18].

Other Effects of Conflicts

- Conflict result into the breakdown of law and order
- It makes it difficult for people to achieve common goals and objectives
- Conflicts bring disunity
- It brings about hatred and dissatisfaction among members of a group or association
- It leads to confusion, insecurity, anxiety and unhappiness
- It leads to unhealthy political rivalry
- It leads to division and separation
- Poor decision making
- It leads to a decrease in productivity and economic depression [19].

How then can Peaceful Co-Existence and Tolerance be Achieved for Sustainable Development?

Nigeria is a great country with immense potential to build the welfare of its population and lead Africa in meeting the sustainable development goal. This can only be achieved in the atmosphere of peace where all citizens live happily irrespective of their ethnic or religious background. Thus in achieving this, there is the need to go back to the basis. The basis here is to make frantic efforts to appeal to what the scripture says to guide us in our relationship with one another. Meanwhile, the present society tends to neglect most of the teachings of the scripture and behave recklessly.

Every religion preaches virtues. Kamaruzaman, for example, identifies precisely, some of the virtues common to all religions and which should serve as the basis for religious freedom and peaceful co-existence among adherents of all religions. Such virtues include, love, patience, compassion, benevolence, kindness, modesty, humility, generosity, patience, forgiveness, tolerance and the likes [20]. For example still, all Christians affirm that the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus is God's rule of righteousness and peace. Jesus himself perfectly exemplified in his conduct that the ideals of the kingdom be proclaimed; that the kingdom community is to hunger for righteousness, pursue peace, forbear revenge and love enemies. This means that as

Christians, there is the need to be primarily committed to peace and righteousness. This largely is equally and unequivocally the teachings of the Islamic faith. The above traditions teach harmonious relationship that is to be encouraged by both followers of the two faiths. To buttress further from the Christian side, the Holy Bible, in Peter 3:11 says: Let him eschew evil, and do good, let him seek peace and ensue it. For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers, but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil. If such teachings are emulated by adherents of most religions of the world, and Nigeria in particular, there will be no crisis.

Also, it should be noted that Nigeria been a multi-ethnic and religious setting is neither a mistake nor a curse. Rather, it was purposely designed by providence in order to harness the human and material resources of the country. Therefore, it is expedient that the citizen, irrespective of tribe and tongue, love one another. Jesus showed this by practicing what he preached. He did not despise the ethno-Samaritans, but rather loved them and taught them too to love and not to return evil for evil. Jesus further practiced his teachings in his call to non-resistance. He did not resist neither betrayal nor arrest, neither trial nor sentence; neither torture nor crucifixion even when he had the power to deal with his accusers. He loved those who despised and rejected him and even prayed for the forgiveness of those who nailed him to the cross. The teachings of Jesus together commit us to the way of non resistance and non violence.

In the same vein, the society we are is full of division and disputes, bitterness and hatred, quarrels and wars. It is a divided world because some individuals are self-centered. Therefore, there is need for all and sundry to be harbingers of peace particularly people of faith. Although, many a person has a cheek slapped which in order words could be an insult, threat or physical attack; in such an occasion, giving one's cheek is difficult but then it means peace, less conflicts, sustainable development in the society. Moreover, this does not mean stupidity, ignorance or weakness; neither does it mean one cannot fight for one's right. Since revenge is not part of our lives submission is sometimes the way to overcome. The common saying goes: a tooth for a tooth leaves the mouth toothless and an eye for an eye leaves the world blind.

On the international level, the ego of the individual in power becomes the ego of the nation. The lack of spirit of tolerance, the unforgiving spirit and vengeful nature of one man; the penchant for dispute and show of strength; all these lead to international imbroglio, loss of economic and technological potentials and abundance, famine and scarcity, lack of development, degradation and misuse of earth resources, wars and wanton loss of human lives.

CONCLUSION

For the world to have peace and for any nation to move forward there is the need to revisit those words of Jesus, respect and take them for what they are. Foolish though they seem to our wisdom but therein resides the irony of sincere wisdom. For us as individual and nations not to be tied up and consumed by unnecessary disputes over property, possessions, rights and privileges, there is need to digest these words and align with its lessons. In Nigeria, intolerance and unacceptability of one another has heated the polity and caused tension. The socio-political history of Nigeria had been equally bedeviled by series of conflicts especially of ethnic and religious nature. These conflicts are also varied, sometimes within a given religion or between religions, so also are the cases with ethnic crisis. These crises are seriously hindering the nation towards achieving her desired objectives of unity and stability which is the basic pre-requisite for any meaningful development. There is need for Nigerians irrespective of religious affiliations to preach and promote ethno-religious tolerance and accommodations of diverse views as means to deepening of peaceful co-existence and unity in the country. Thus, this paper is concluded with a more secure basis of spirit of tolerance and acceptance as exemplified in the work of T. F. Jemiriye that, acceptance would help a man to undertake the responsibility of the other person honestly as the person's responsibility. In other words, acceptance of mankind by mankind is the only possible solution to the problem of conflict in religion and otherwise [21]. Therefore, it suffices to say here that, Jesus is not saying we should not move to secure, protect, fight for our right or even fight a just war but these should be towards the creation of a reconciled society, devoid of malice, anger, bitterness. He advocates, through turning the other cheek, a society that is full of love, joy and security such that enhances peace, sustainable development and cordial international relations; in short a new world order.

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